



Neo Ntsoma

Inspiring young people to empower themselves

AN EFFECTIVE FRAMEWORK
TO DEVELOP CIVIC IDENTITY
IN SOUTH AFRICA

The development of civic identity among young people in South Africa is an enormously difficult task in a country that remains so polarised culturally, economically and socially, even after 20 years of a new democratic dispensation. Where does one start looking when challenged by these massive mountains that confront a country such as South Africa?

By Martin Scholtz



The President's Award

How does one begin to engage with these issues when faced with the levels of disparity that exist here? The reality for South Africa is that there are numerous obstacles which stand in the way of securing opportunities to develop civic identity in young people: The number of young people who live in environments – both rural and urban – that are essentially about survival, make it difficult for them to engage in personal self-development routines; a very tenuous education system which battles to support opportunities for civic identity development let alone basic education; party-politicisation of youth development warps the perceptions about the value and purpose of civic education; the lack of sustainable, long-term interventions for youth due to short-term funding for organisations within the youth development field. The vision for young people is just not clear enough.

At the end of the day, I would argue, notwithstanding the obstacles, those of us who are working within the youth empowerment environment in South Africa and who are able to sustain the work that we do, need to *encourage*, we need to *inspire*, and we need to *create opportunities* for young people to exercise their right to developing a civic identity.

What is civic identity for a young person? In broad

terms it means having an identity which resonates with the broader social or political framework. It is an identity where young people feel that what they contribute, what they say, and what they do “counts”. It is a space where young people feel that they are recognised – in the South African and in the global context – as important and contributing members of society. As part of The President’s Award for Youth Empowerment Programme young people take part in a Bronze Level hike. In the most recent one held in the Eastern Cape, 24 young people hiked over two days, walking a total of 24kms. Six of the youngsters were from St Mary’s Day Care Centre, three of them from St Andrew’s College, and 19 of them from the Upstart Community Youth Group. While their social, political and cultural contexts are vastly different, they also have some things in common. They all go to school in Grahamstown. They are all enrolled to do the Bronze Level of the Award Programme. They are all young people between the ages of 14 and 25. And they are all South Africans. In the words of Brett Malila, programme manager for the Award Programme in the Eastern Cape who facilitated the hike: “Hiking itself was but a single component of this journey, as the youngsters assisted with the map reading and – on arrival at the campsite – set up camp and cooked their

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own food. For some of them, this was the first time they had put up a tent, cooked two minute noodles and walked with such heavy packs. The evening was spent interacting with each other and apart from dancing and singing around the fire, the group discussed citizenship, and positive leadership, and the history of the area. It was amazing to see how these young people interacted ... finding their rhythm as they danced and sang as one, even though the language used was not always known to some.”

The hike is used as a metaphor for life, to assist young people to internalise the need to look at their own development as a journey. They need to pack their rucksacks well, to pace themselves, to support one another, to take it “one step at a time”, to keep focused, and to have a plan. What is remarkable is to hear the reflections of the young people who took part. One of the St Andrew’s College boys, Stuart Hobson, had this to say: “I live a very sheltered and secluded life from the cultures, languages and ways of life even in my own backyard ... [but the experience of dancing the night away with traditional Xhosa songs] showed me how to really enjoy a night’s fun with only your voice and legs.” Reflected here is a sense that he is part of something bigger that he was not aware of before – a watershed moment for a young South African, perhaps?

“We must interact with others even though they are from different races,” reflected Ncwadi Nqatyiiswa, one of the Upstart members after the hike, who had for the first time in her life, done a joint activity with a young white South African her own age. The hike “gave me some time to think about my future and also South Africa’s future,” said Xabisa Mgudlandlu, also of Upstart. More watershed moments in the lives of young South Africans?

In The President’s Award for Youth Empowerment’s 30-year history in South Africa, there have been many examples of young people who have developed their civic identity through active involvement in the Award Programme. The examples range from a group of inmates in a prison in the Western Cape, who have set up a vegetable garden within the prison walls to supply a crèche in the local community with healthy produce, to a privileged white boy who started up a township cricket team in the Eastern Cape. There is a participant who initiated the Pink Hijab Day to conscientise people in the Muslim community about breast cancer, and another who has formed an NGO which looks at supporting school-going youth in the Eastern Cape. There is a group of Award participants in rural Limpopo who are supporting needy households by assisting with their washing, cooking, and home maintenance. Each of the case studies reflected here talk to active youth engagement. They are young people who are not sitting back, waiting for things to happen, but are determined to engage with their own development and the development of others. Developing civic identity in young people means action on the part of young people. The Award is about *action*. It is about setting goals and setting out, as best as possible, to achieve those goals. So it does not matter whether you are a young person in the remote Waschbank Village in Limpopo,

a young Muslim woman from Azaadville, a boy from Fingo Village, or a boy from an independent school in the Eastern Cape, if you are prepared to take on the challenge that the Award presents to you, you are given the opportunity to explore your civic identity. This is what all young South Africans need to explore their own civic identity – an opportunity to be active, to be engaged and to be involved.

- ***Xolile Madinda***

Xolile, who grew up in Fingo Village in Grahamstown, achieved his Gold Award in 1999. He is a co-founder of Save Our Schools and Community (SOSAC), which operates in Grahamstown and Port Elizabeth. The organisation assists school-going youth with tutoring, homework sessions, and life skills training. Xolile – an avid hip-hop artist – was a founding member of the Makana Arts Council and is an active member of the Khulumani Support Group, which calls for corporates that supported the apartheid regime to pay reparations. Xolile is also actively involved in the Fingo Festival, which has become a voice of expression for township youth. This has included providing a platform for township youth to be part of the National Arts Festival held in Grahamstown annually, but has also got involved in seeking opinion regarding the debate about the city’s name change.

- ***Humairah Jassat***

Humairah received her Gold Award in 2011. While in Grade 11, she became aware of a number of women in her community, Azaadville, south of Johannesburg, who had died of breast cancer. As part of the service component of the Award Programme, she asked her headmaster whether the girls at the school could wear pink hijabs on a specific day. Permission granted, she phoned other Muslim schools around the country to do the same and so Pink Hijab Day began raising money and awareness for The Cancer Association of South Africa. The concept won Humairah the inaugural African Leadership Academy’s Social Innovation Prize, as well as the opportunity to share her project at a dinner of the Duke of Edinburgh’s International Award in the UK. Speaking to supporters of the Award, Humairah says she was inspired to take on the issue of breast cancer care when volunteering at a local hospice. “I realised that the subject of breast cancer was still taboo, especially among young women in the Muslim community,” said Humairah.

- ***Ross McCreath***

Ross, aged 14, was enrolled on the Bronze Level in 2008 of the Award Programme. As part of his community service, he set up a cricket club – The Tiger Titans Cricket Club – on a field adjacent to his parent’s farm, which is across the road from Nolutkanyo Township outside Bathurst. Initially a December holiday project with 20 youngsters from the township, the Cricket Club has grown to 100 strong in just five years. The club has several teams at different age groups, with the senior team competing in the 2nd Division Grahamstown Cricket League. In addition, the Tiger Titans boast four

players selected to represent Eastern Province. One of the Tiger Titans, Masixole “Hassan” Mkrakra, was invited to speak at Lord’s Cricket Ground in March 2012, to reflect on the impact of the Award Programme and cricket on his life: “The Award has given me the chance to see that I am able to make a difference to my own life and in my community. I have overcome many fears. I have made new friends. I have learnt new skills. I have found that I can be: a leader, a helper, a teacher, and a positive influence in my community. I am proud of who I have become and am grateful for those who have helped me to make the right choices.”

He received a standing ovation. Tragically, Masixole drowned on the 17 December while trying to save the life of a friend – giving up his own life for another.

• Limpopo

There is a group of 93 young people from Waschbank Village in Limpopo on the Award Programme at the Bronze and Silver levels. The village is situated about 45km from Polokwane and has a population of around 1 700 people. Through a partnership with Class Act, an NGO that does focused community development in two sites in the province, these young people are engaging in a very practical way with their own development in the Waschbank Village. As part of their community service for the Award Programme, a team of eight of them formed a support group to assist two disabled brothers in the community. The group focused their efforts on the boys’ home which was infested with rats and was run down, cleaning it up and doing basic maintenance work on it. They continue, on a weekly basis, to cook and clean for the brothers, committing themselves to support people within the Waschbank Village who need it.

Conclusion

We have a responsibility in the youth empowerment sector, to create more opportunities for young people to explore their civic identities through this sort of engagement, lest we face our own Arab Spring. Young people need to feel a connectedness with themselves, their communities, and the country at large. They need to experience purpose and tangible results from their own actions and decisions. As an organisation with the support of over 500 adult Award volunteers, a network of corporate companies in South Africa, provincial and national government support, we feel that we have found a framework that challenges young people to be active, to be engaged, and to connect with others. Much like the young people on the most recent hike who connected with each other through song, let us find rhythm, as we find each other.



Fergus Burnett/The President's Award



The President's Award

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